

Baystate Banner
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Task force looking at Strand's future

Jeremy Schwab

Apr. 1, 2004 - Mayor Thomas Menino formed a task force last week to discuss new directions for the city-owned Strand Theater, which community members and producers complain has fallen into the hands of an inept and perhaps corrupt management team.

"The Department of Neighborhood Development is planning to draft a request for proposals for any qualified groups or individuals to manage the Strand," said DND spokesman DeWayne Lehman. "At this point, I would say the McCormack Center [for the Arts] faces insurmountable challenges in presenting a qualified proposal."

"I met with Victoria and she said, 'We can't have white people working here. White people don't understand how this stuff is done.'"

- Brian Isaacs

The board of the McCormack Center, whose 25-year lease on the Strand ends June 30, appointed Victoria Jones as executive director two years ago.

Since then, the Strand has racked up thousands of dollars in debts and key producers have left in frustration as management changed the terms of their contracts and did not pay them what they said they were owed.

The Strand first came under scrutiny when the Banner published a series of exposés beginning in February. The articles detailed the Strand's poor financial management. The Banner found that a \$15,000 check to a producer had bounced and Victoria Jones' daughter Lisa accepted a "commission" for \$300 that went against the theater's practices and was not mentioned in any contract.

Producers who have used the theater sometimes complain they do not receive the money they believe they are owed.

"Unfortunately, in a lot of situations like this you have to weigh the financial costs of recovering the money," said former Strand Theater Director Emerson Kington. "Some producers say, 'I'll take 70 percent without the headache.'"

Kington, who was let go in October of 2002, says that he and other employees or former employees are still owed money by the Strand.

"A lot of people are trying to collect on lost wages," he said.

Tony Williams, who heads the group BalletRox which puts on the popular Urban Nutcracker each year, plans to move to a new venue after the Strand sent him a late check for \$15,000 - less money than he thought he was owed - that ultimately bounced.

The Strand ran in the blue under long-time Director Geri Guardino throughout most of the 1990s.

But those days are over. In recent weeks city investigators have turned up tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid fire and utility bills owed by the theater.

Victoria Jones blames the Strand's rocky financial straits on the poor economy and under-funding for the arts.

But observers have questioned the competence and integrity of the theater's management.

First Choice Limousine CEO Charles Muhammad says that Lisa Jones asked him to make a check out to her for \$300 - a fee which was not part of Muhammad's \$3,000 contract with the theater and is not mentioned in any rental brochures or standard contracts.

"I thought this was how they got paid there," said Muhammad.

But when he approached then Technical Director Brian "Sideshow" Isaacs, Muhammad was told that commissions were not a Strand practice. Isaacs said, however, that Lisa had been collecting commissions.

"I kind of knew Lisa was [collecting commissions], but I'd never been brought face to face with it until Muhammad," said Isaacs. Isaacs soon quit after being harassed by management.

"I quit because I have a relationship with BalletRox," he said. "They didn't want me talking to people who were about to sue them. I met with Victoria and she said, 'We can't have white people working here. White people don't understand how this stuff is done.'"

"In a lot of situations like this you have to weigh the financial costs of recovering the money."

- Emerson Kington

Meanwhile Muhammad, whose C. C. Sounds will produce a Classic R & B concert at the Strand May 9, was recently told by management that he should sell his own tickets, which would require an addendum to the contract he had already signed which called for the Strand to handle the tickets. Muhammad was informed of the changes after word had leaked out about the \$300 check.

Victoria and Lisa Jones, and McCormack Board Chairman Juan Evereteze, could not be reached for comment for this article.

THE STRAND MUST PARTNER-UP TO THRIVE

Op-Ed

RICHARD L. CRAVATTS

928 Words

12 April 2004

The Boston Globe

A.15

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THE CRISIS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF BOSTON'S STRAND THEATRE IS SERIOUS, BUT IT IS NOT AN UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCE FOR SMALL NONPROFIT GROUPS, WHICH OFTEN HAVE INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO SUSTAIN ARTISTIC OR ECONOMIC VIABILITY. EVEN BOSTON'S DOMINANT ARTS ORGANIZATIONS FIND THEMSELVES STRUGGLING TO THRIVE IN AN ERA OF EVAPORATING FUNDING, SHRINKING AUDIENCES, AND ALTERNATE ENTERTAINMENT VENUES. The Strand has fortunately benefited from the patronage of the City of Boston (with free rent and capital improvements) and the Boston Foundation, among others, who know well the positive economic impact that arts have on a city. The Massachusetts Cultural Council, for instance, noted that in 1996 the impact on the state's economy of not-for-profit institutions was \$2.56 billion.

But the Strand has not performed up to expected standards, has reversed financially, and seems programmatically adrift - factors that have led its benefactors to have second thoughts about continued support. If the Strand is to survive as a viable performing arts venue, it has to show that it can be a good strategic partner with those stakeholders upon whom it depends to survive.

That topic is discussed engagingly in "Profits With Principles: Seven Strategies for Delivering Value With Values," an upcoming book by Ira A. Jackson and Jane Nelson, a primer for businesses wanting to do well by doing good. "Instead of ad hoc sponsorship or donations," they write, "companies are looking at how to mobilize their core competencies and resources . . . to address community issues . . . Instead of charity, companies are looking for mutual benefit, for issues that link to their own business challenges, strategies, and interests."

If the Strand or other struggling nonprofits have to rely on the for-profit sector for their survival, they are going to have to be strong partners in the process, giving as well as receiving of resources, prestige, human capital, influence, and good will. That model is what Northwestern University business professors Jane Scheff and Philip Kotler have described as "strategic collaborations," in which arts organizations strengthen themselves through working alliances with businesses, community groups, or other nonprofits.

What should the Strand Theatre do now to help create some strategic collaborations, leverage its strengths, and enhance its mission?:

* Convert the real estate into part of the brand. The M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts currently runs the 1,400-seat, city-owned Strand. That relationship has been productive, but has not proven to be economically adequate to even maintain

the physical integrity of the facility.

The Wang Center's transformation from outdated movie house into a vibrant center for the arts, for example, was due in large part to the desire of a large corporation to gain naming rights and benefit from a philanthropic investment. A formula like that can work for the Strand, too, if a regional business buys naming rights and becomes involved permanently with the theater, wishing to positively influence the inner-city community in which it intends to do business.

- * Collaborate with other nonprofit arts groups to build audience share. Scheff and Kotler cited a 1989 study that showed that arts groups, working together to market their individual venues, do not - as might be expected - create competition between venues. In fact, cooperative marketing between arts organizations has proven to increase audience involvement across all venues.

The Strand could benefit from the marketing expertise and audience development resources of other, established Boston arts groups, and can become a "cultural gateway" through which new minority audiences - exposed to performances first at the Strand - then become part of Boston's larger cultural community.

- * Apply the best practices of business to the way nonprofits operate. When collaborations are formed between a business and an arts group, the nonprofit needs, and should expect, more than financial support: It benefits also from the vast resources of the business, namely, access to sophisticated technology and human capital, volunteer hours by employees, and advertising, promotion, and public relations boosts through co-branded marketing campaigns.

- * Form collaborations with nonprofits outside the arts. Scheff and Kotler describe how the St. Louis Symphony created a unique and very successful alliance with its neighboring, largely African- American churches. The symphony helped build grassroots support for itself by going into the churches and articulating its mission, helping to create new audiences and generate additional ticket sales by offering a choice of key benefits to congregants.

- * Understand its target market and reposition its mission, if necessary, to reflect the changing and diverse cultural traditions of Dorchester. If the Strand is to become a cultural gateway through which its surrounding neighborhoods have their initial exposure to the arts, it will have to fully engage the interests - and artistic tastes of - of not only African-Americans, but increasingly Hispanic, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and other ethnic groups, perhaps through cultural festivals and celebrations, hip hop dancing shows, summer arts camps, and education-themed events promoted through local schools.

With some creative synergy and additional resources, the Strand can continue to be a valuable cultural resource for Boston, and the effort to save it from neglect is clearly worthwhile. That process of forming new alliances is what Jackson and Nelson suggest as one important step in creating public good, and has, they contend, "the potential to transform traditional philanthropy and civic engagement in order to increase its leverage and effectiveness." That's a step all stakeholders should be willing to embrace.

STRAND STANDS

Arts / Entertainment

135 Words

25 April 2004

The Boston Globe

THIRD

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I have attended shows at the Strand Theatre for the past couple of years and noticed how terrible the general running of the place was. The box office was a joke, particularly in the last 12 months, during which my tickets were lost and not refunded on two occasions. I no longer live in Boston but was please to read that this management was getting exposed. Their removal from their positions would be a blessing. Thank you for the sterling coverage.

ANNETTE GREANEY

Hyde Park

STRAND STANDS

Arts / Entertainment

206 Words

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The Boston Globe

THIRD

N.2

English

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I am writing to congratulate the Globe for running two major articles and an editorial on the Strand Theatre ("The Venerable Strand Theatre faces the music," Living/Arts, March 29; "Task force on Strand Theatre to be named," Living/Arts, March 25).

I was very pleased with Maureen Dezell's skillful and balanced reporting. The present management of the Strand Theatre needs to be removed from their positions. My sense is that they will. They have harmed small nonprofit organizations, producers, and Boston's youth (after-school programming). I am offended, as an African American, when I hear that Lisa Jones says that this is a racial issue (white against black). It is not. If anything, it is black-on-black crime. The current Strand management has robbed the very community that they purportedly serve.

Thank you for running those stories that got the city to take action.

TONY WILLIAMS

Artistic director, BalletRox, Urban Nutcracker Dorchester